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Secular feminisms and attitudes towards religion in the context of a West-European Society – Flanders, Belgium



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SYNOPSIS

Ideologies and politics of humanism and secularism in Western Europe historically have a tensioned relationship with religion as well as with feminism and the women's movement. In this article, I aim to demonstrate the multiplicity and complexity of several recent secular feminist responses to increasing religious diversity and the activism of Muslim women in the context of Belgium – a society that is part of postcolonial Europe and is characterized by a specific religious–secular landscape. I argue that the diverging ways in which secular feminists approach Islam and the activism of Muslim women point at a controversy among white secular feminists about religion – that is situated within and reconfiguring the local religious–secular landscape through its (re)constructions of feminist secularities.

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Introduction

The relationship between feminism and religion in the West-European context can be at best regarded as an ambivalent one (Aune, 2011; Braidotti, 2008). Both in academia and political and popular debates, religion is often regarded to be on the side of women's oppression. At the same time, mainstream feminism is largely known and imagined as secular. However, since recent years, in several West-European countries, such as France and the Netherlands, secular feminists are forced to rethink their standpoint about religion, notably Islam – leading to heated feminist debates about 'religion', 'culture' and women's 'agency' or 'emancipation' and to differing outcomes and results in terms of arguments and practices (Gole, 2010; Midden, 2012; Scott, 2007). Also the white women's movement in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern region of Belgium, has in the last few years been confronted with the increasing visibility of young Muslim women in the public sphere. Due to increasing religious diversity in urban regions and the activism of Muslim women, white secular feminists encounter religion, female religiosity and religious feminists in new ways. However, they have never reached a consensus about attitudes

towards Islam, Muslims and Muslim feminists, nor about the possibility of feminism or women's emancipation within Islamic frameworks (van den Brandt, 2013). The feminist discussions about the Muslim headscarf and its regulation within schools or at the labor market reveal the lack of agreement about and negative attitudes towards religion in general, and Islam in particular (S'jegers, 2005).

The current ambivalent relationship between feminism and Islam in Western-Europe is not independent from broader social–political contexts. In Flanders, as in other regions of Western-Europe, political and media debates about migration, integration and the multicultural society are partly focused on the emancipation of migrant women or gender equality within migrant communities. Many see Islam as a cultural–religious formation that stands in opposition to freedom and equality – values that are assumed to be characteristics of secular societies. However, Coene and Longman criticize such public representations as "the appropriation of a 'colonial feminist discourse' that essentializes 'culture' and 'religion' in view of an assimilation agenda rather than a real concern for the status of (minority) women" (2004, p. 3). The standpoints taken up in the protracted headscarf debates and recent public controversies about street sexism and homophobic

intimidation and violence perpetrated by ethnic minority young men as a result of the broadcasting of two reportages on the public television VRT (*Femme the la Rue* by Sofie Peeters in summer 2012 and a *VOLT* reportage in November 2012) illustrate understandings of Islam as oppressive and liberal-secular values as facilitating freedom and equality (Longman, 2013). Bracke and Fadil (2009) argue that secularist views play increasingly a role in the debates about cultural diversity, which oppose Islam and the religiosity of young Muslim men and women. Some individual feminists and women's organizations also embrace secularist points of view. The increasing visibility and social mobility of young Muslim men and women and "the reality of young Muslim women who are currently (re)fashioning their religious gender identity in an emancipatory manner" (Coene & Longman, 2004 p. 3) seem to confront the increasingly secularized white majority population and white feminists anew with a collective memory of anticlerical struggle against Catholic authorities, traditions and morality (Dobbelaere, 2008).

In this article, I aim to explore and demonstrate the multiplicity and complexity of the recent secular feminist responses to religious diversity and the activism of Muslim women in the context of Flanders – which I describe as a society that is part of postcolonial Europe (Ponzanesi & Blagaard, 2011) and is characterized by a specific religious–secular landscape. The notion 'Catholic secularity' is mine and I use it here with the intention to describe how the religious–secular landscape of Flanders leads to certain dominant formations of secularity (Asad, 2003) – captured as 'Catholic secularity'. In this article, I will point at and elaborate on the ways in which secular standpoints are embedded within a particular Flemish religious–secular landscape that is since recent decades characterized by: first of all, increasing secularization, not least in terms of the levels of churchgoing of its majority population (Dobbelaere, 2008); secondly, an increasing visibility of young socially mobile Muslims, who make political–social claims about equal representation, freedom of religion and non-discrimination (Fadil & Kanmaz, 2009); and finally, a continuing privileged and powerful position of Catholicism in its relationship to the state (Dobbelaere, 2008; Franken & Loobuyck, 2012). The formations of the secular that emerge from the changing landscape assume to trigger neutrality and inclusivity, but keep out of sight the fact that normative understandings of 'religion' and 'secularity' are shifting and that power relations are implicated (Asad, 2003; Bracke, 2011; Fadil, 2011). I will analyze the responses of secular feminists to increasing religious diversity and the interpellations by Muslim women regarding the ways in which these are embedded within the religious–secular landscape. This article emerges from my 4-year PhD research on the relationships between religion, secularism and feminism within the context of Flanders and is part of its ongoing analysis of divergent attitudes towards religion that can be found among feminists and women's movements in Flanders. The Dutch-speaking women's movements in Belgium are far from monolithic regarding standpoints, practices, attitudes, understandings and concerns about the relationships between feminism and Islam. This article therefore contributes to revealing the diversity of the field of white secular feminist thinking and practices that are

influenced by and simultaneously reconfiguring the landscape of feminism, religion and secularity. I hope to develop narratives and analytical tools to better understand the complex constructions of secularity, religion and feminism, and to contribute to nuanced perspectives towards them. I argue that the diverging ways in which secular feminists approach Islam and the activism of Muslim women point at a controversy among white secular feminists about religion – that is situated within and reconfiguring the local religious–secular landscape through its (re)constructions of feminist secularities.

With the term 'secular feminism' I refer to those feminists and women's movements that do not explicitly refer in their thinking and practices to religious or spiritual sources of inspiration, but rather to humanist, liberal and socialist thinking to frame their feminist arguments.ⁱ In order to explore the issue of white secular feminism, Islam and the feminist activism of Muslim women, I will first of all explore Flemish formations of the secular in terms of a history of power struggle and conflict between what came to be opposite views on politics and ethics. Second, I look at recent writings about and reflections on feminism and religion by two Dutch-speaking white feminist writers, who explicitly identify with humanism as a philosophical outlook on society and human relationships. Finally, I analyze the trajectory of a white Dutch-speaking women's organization, the Women's Consultation Committee (*Vrouwen Overleg Komitee* – VOK), regarding Islam and Muslim feminists. I engage in the critical reading of two articles recently published by the humanist writers considered in this article, and of academic literature about VOK and gray literature produced by VOK. The reading focused on deconstructing understandings of religion in general, and Islam in particular, and of visions on Muslim women and Muslim women's feminism. The discussed material is not representative for feminism in Flanders at large – a major limitation is that it leaves out the large Catholic women's movements. However, I believe it is rather representative of the diversity of ways of thinking about and attitudes towards religion and Muslim women that can be found among white secular feminists and women's movements in Flanders.ⁱⁱ

Rethinking Belgian formations of secularity through conflict

In Catholic regions of Europe, formations of secularism (as a political doctrine) and secularity (as an epistemological category) come into being through conflict at several societal levels. Here, I argue that Belgian current formations of the secular came into existence through a history of ideological and political conflict in a pillarized society, and more recently, through conflict with the increasing visibility of Muslims and Islam as a migrant religion. I moreover argue that the near disappearance of progressive Christianity from collective memory facilitates the current hostility of the white Catholic and non-Catholic population against the recent increasing visibility of Islam. To that end, I discuss a number of academic accounts of European formations of the secular, of which some are of Belgian secularity in particular.

Both the work of philosopher Charles Taylor and sociologist Jose Casanova enlarge, from different perspectives, our understanding of the origins through conflict of European secular standpoints and attitudes vis-à-vis what is deemed 'religion'. Taylor (2007) provides a phenomenological and genealogical account of the contemporary condition of belief and unbelief. According to Casanova, it perfectly matches the radical secularity of West-European societies in terms of its populations' decreasing church commitments and increasing levels of non-belief (2010, p. 271). Taylor engages with philosophical and literary writings to differentiate certain tendencies through time when it comes to notions of self, society and time that have led to the creation of what he calls the 'immanent frame' – the increasing dominance and plausibility of atheist viewpoints (p. 539–543). He points at the emergence of intellectual anticlerical discourses as crucial in developing ways of seeing and living that are closed to the possibility of the transcendental (p. 544). What pushes to closure are notions of the good that are intrinsically seen as immanent developed by Enlightenment philosophers from the 18th century, from the time of Gibbon, Voltaire and Hume, who called Christian notions of the higher good 'fanaticism'. Taylor sees in 19th century France a case in point, where an initial movement of anti-clericalism turned into a rejection of Christianity and later into atheism. In combination with the colossal success of modern natural science that gives the impression of unlocking all mysteries, many came to see the growth of civilization, or the coming of modernity, as synonymous with the laying out of the immanent frame. A focus on the human good, aided by the use of scientific reason, came to be constructed as permitting the flourishing of human beings. In this philosophical tradition, 'religion' (in this case Christianity) comes to be regarded as undercutting reason and as menacing human flourishing with its fanaticism (p. 546–548).

Casanova focuses part of his work (e.g. 2009; 2010) on the construction of European continental secularity. In his narrative, conflict can be discerned in a notion of boundaries between the secular and the religious and the conflictual marginalization of the latter. Modern European processes are first of all made possible, he points out, because of the Medieval Latin Christian discursive split and system of classifications of religious and secular realms. During processes of secularization, secularity became the dominant order, pushing the spiritual/religious to the margins. In the words of Casanova: "It ends with the establishment of the secular immanent frame as the single reality, within which religion and spirituality will have to find its place" (2010, p. 275). The Latin-Catholic path towards secularity takes the form of 'laicization', in which anticlericalism plays a central role. The boundaries between the religious and the secular are maintained, however, everything religious is pushed into the margins – contained, privatized and marginalized. This general frame of Latin-Catholic secularization contains a multiplicity of locally historically situated patterns in various West-European regions and nation-states. At the same time, contemporary European societies, according to Casanova, remain extremely homogenous in their forms of religiosity as well as their forms of secularity. Europe's massive conversion to secularity happens through a movement from Christian affiliation to disaffiliation, or the 'unchurching' of the Europeans, and/or the movement from belief to unbelief,

or the growth in the surveys of the categories of 'no religion' or 'atheist' (2010, p. 276–277, 279–280).

Sociologist Karel Dobbelaere argues that indeed, "the process of secularization typically implies conflict for countries with a Catholic tradition", as histories of processes of secularization in France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Belgium demonstrate (2008, p. 69). Dobbelaere describes secularization as the conscious and intended process of functional differentiation between religion and so-called secular spheres – such as politics, education, health care and family life (p. 69). Ethical issues and feminist struggles – such as abortion, euthanasia and same-sex couple marriages – played since the 1990s until the early 2000s an important role in the secularization of the Belgian society and its population. These struggles were conflicts between the Catholic church, the monarchy and Catholic political parties versus socialist and liberal political parties leading to the latter's victories in terms of liberalization of abortion (1990) and of the use of drugs and euthanasia (2002) and the passing of a law on marriage of homosexual couples (2003) (p. 76). Today, these conflicts are ingrained in a public collective memory, especially on the part of humanist, liberal and socialist politicians and civil society, among them feminists and women's movements, as struggles for greater freedom and equality and against the influence of the Catholic church and Christian political parties. What is often not remembered, however, are histories of dissident arguments for justice within Catholicism. Historian Latré (2011) researched the movements of progressive Christians who took part in many leftist and feminist struggles throughout Flanders especially in the 1970s, the 1980s and the 1990s on the basis of liberation theology, progressive readings of the Gospels with an emphasis on the fate of the poor and feminist theology. They countered the Catholic church and Christian parties arguing for a revolution within the church as well as in society. However, this recent history seems hardly part of collective memory and public debates. The one-sided impression of secularization as a violent process of conflict with Catholicism as a homogenous block of conservative politics, civil society and individuals, is therefore dominant. This near disappearance, I argue, is one of the underexplored factors that currently enables political and public polemic against the increasing visibility of Islam in Belgium.

Opposed to France, Belgium "is not characterized by a unified secular model (*laïcité*) but rather constituted by a constellation of often conflicting ideological perspectives, ranging from adherents of the French *laïcité* principle to Catholic and non-Catholic defenders of the public role of religion" (Fadil 2011, p. 87). The active participation of Catholic organizations in Belgian civil society, especially Flanders, is up until today seen as an important hallmark of Belgian society. However, as anthropologist Nadia Fadil points out, in recent years, this heterogenous secular model "has undergone a number of transformations and found new points of articulation around the increasing public visibility of Muslims, with the headscarf controversy as the most concrete illustration" (2011, p. 87). Fadil explains that the regulation against visible religious signs – predominantly targeting the Islamic headscarf – for pupils and teachers, adopted by the board of the public schools of the Flemish community can be seen as an example of the transformation

of the Belgian secular model. It “signaled a rupture with the prevailing church–state relations in the educational system, announcing a shift from a bottom-up to a more centralist and top-down approach” (2011, p. 88). According to sociologist Bracke and Fadil (2009), exclusive secularist views play increasingly a role in public debates about religious–cultural diversity, and are put in opposition to Islam and the religiosity of young Muslim men and women. Demands for neutrality are articulated especially in relation to the Islamic headscarf at school or at a job as a government functionary. They reduce the headscarf to a religious symbol pitted against the ‘neutrality’ of government functionaries or the sameness of high school pupils. Secularist views, Bracke & Fadil argue, are put forward as a definite ideal that cannot be discussed. At the same time, secularism becomes more and more interpreted in terms of the French model of *laïcité*, which is at odds with the history of secularism in Belgium (p. 93–94). Although Belgium does not have a colonial history in regions inhabited predominantly by Muslims, the terms of the debate draw upon the history of European colonialist discourses and practices about veiling, in which feminism was implicated (Ahmad, 1992). In these debates, secularism and secularity are constructed as facilitating and enabling the equality of men and women and the emancipation of women and sexual minorities – in opposition to religion. This invocation is powerful as it actively relates to the above-mentioned recent feminist struggles in Belgium – and other West-European countries (Aune, 2011; Braidotti, 2008) – against the influence of religious authorities and religious views in women's lives.

Above I outlined the way in which we can understand Belgian formations of the secular through conflict with the Catholic tradition and today, with the visibility of Islam and Muslim minorities. In both conflicts, struggles over women's bodies are central. At the same time, in powerful discourses about secularism and secularity, explicit mention of the term ‘conflict’ is often lacking as secularism and the secular figure as universal progress and good for all. The narrative about secularism goes as such: the more secular, the more rational, the more enlightened or emancipatory or progressive, the more freedom (Jakobsen & Pellegrini, 2008). With the above exploration in mind, in which the secular figures as conflict, we need to ask whether the secular is indeed good for all. It follows, as political theorist Janet Jakobsen & religious studies scholar An Pellegrini put it (2001), that we need to critically reflect on feminist and women's movements' notions of ‘progressive’ politics. This is a difficult task as women's movements are well schooled in the progress narrative of the Enlightenment (Braidotti, 2008), which is extremely difficult to give up given that these women's movements are in some sense products of this narrative (Jakobsen & Pellegrini, 2001). When it comes to studying the argumentation and politics of feminists and women's movements in Flanders, we similarly need to probe notions of progressive politics, and the ways in which these intertwine with notions of the religious and the secular. What does it mean – in the West-European context, and in times of migration, cultural–religious diversification and formations of Catholic secularity – to be ‘progressive’ and inclusive when it comes to issues that are seen as religious?

In the next section, I intend to investigate several diverging discourses and attitudes of secular feminisms in Flanders vis-à-vis religion, Islam and Muslim women. I aim to find out

if and in how far the history of the secular as conflict with religion is reproduced, reinforced or transformed into a new formation of secularity. In the following, I first explore two different discourses of Dutch-speaking feminist humanist writers in Belgium regarding religious diversity, Islam and women's emancipation. Humanism, as an intellectual tradition emerging from Enlightenment philosophy, is the common departure of the two writers I introduce below. Humanism, in the Belgian context, needs to be understood as a phenomenon that exists at several societal levels: it is a historical stream of thought emerging from Enlightenment philosophies and articulated, rethought and developed at philosophy departments at universities throughout Belgium; humanist anticlerical thinking was until the early 1960s the motor behind the struggle of liberal and socialist politicians and civil society against the social–political role and power of Catholicism (de Witte et al., 2005); and it is a particular life-stance and a non-confessional tradition that is recognized and financially supported by the state since 1993, in the same way the state supports religious communities and their spaces and practices of worship (Franken & Loobuyck, 2012). It is important to remind in the context of this article that in the 1960s, the major political struggles about the role of Catholicism in public education between the Catholic party and the liberal and socialist parties pacified, and political attention was diverted to socio-economic issues and language controversies between the Flemish and Walloon communities. This process of pacification at the level of life-stance meant that what historians Els Witte, Jan Craeybeckx and Alain Meynen call ‘combative humanism’ moved outside of the structures of political parties and became the monopoly of the organized humanist organizations, such as the Humanist Verbond (Humanist Alliance, established in 1951) and the umbrella organization Unie van Vrijzinnige Verenigingen (Flemish Union of Humanist Associations, established in 1971) (2005, p. 289–292).

Humanist feminist writers on religious diversity and Islam

The humanist feminist writers I introduce and discuss here both identify with humanism as a philosophical tradition. The first, Magda Michielsens, is since 2007 emeritus professor Women's Studies from the University of Antwerp, where she directed the Postgraduate Degree in Women's Studies and the Centre for Women's Studies. Currently, she works as an independent researcher and speaker in the field of women's and gender studies. She received her PhD in ethical philosophy in 1973 at the University of Ghent. Michielsens is moreover involved in organized humanism through active membership of the group Humanist Women of the Humanist-Freethinking Association (used to be called the Humanist Alliance, see above). The second, Gily Coene, is currently teaching at the department of Philosophy and Ethics and the department of Political Science at the Free University of Brussels (VUB). There, she holds since 2006 the chair Humanistics and since 2009 the chair Gender and Politics. She received her PhD in Ethics in 2004, also at the University of Ghent.

Below I will discuss recent short texts by the two feminist humanist writers that are aimed at reaching the public of Flemish organized humanists. The texts are published in the journal *Antenne* – which was until 2012 issued every three

months by the Flemish Union of Humanist Associations and distributed among its members. The journal aims in particular at reaching humanist counselors throughout Flanders and dedicates each issue to one specific theme discussed from several perspectives within the humanist tradition. In 2009, Antenne dedicated a special issue to the theme 'women and humanism'.ⁱⁱⁱ In this issue, several feminist humanist academic writers and counselors were invited to reflect upon the relation between women and humanism. This means that the issue demonstrates a recent Flemish feminist debate within humanism about its historical and current in- and exclusions of women and women's positionings and experiences. For the purpose of this article, I focus upon the contributions by Michielsens and Gily Coene. These contributions deal with 'religion', and were published as the first and second articles in the special issue, attesting to the present-day high level of interest among humanists in debating feminism, religion and multiculturalism. Both Michielsens and Coene at times give public lectures and take part in debates organized by civil society organizations. They therefore mark upon academic as well as public debates about feminism, women's emancipation and religious-cultural diversity, although with very different voices and opinions.

Feminist humanist secularity as conflict

The title of the article by Magda Michielsens (2009) attests to its rather activist tone: *Gender and humanism: towards a combative liberal humanism* (Gender en humanisme: voor een combattief vrijzinnig humanisme). Michielsens starts her article by comparing a feminist social-constructivist understanding of gender with a humanist worldview. Referring to the writings of Simone de Beauvoir (1945) and Cliteur and van Dooren (1991), she argues that these perspectives match well as both emphasize the flexibility of human nature and human self-determination. Because of these basic humanist principles, the author argues, the emancipation of women has often been supported by humanist men aiming at including women within these principles (p. 5–6). Michielsens defines feminism as women's struggle against customs, religion, dogma's, limitations, stereotypes and a lack of rationality (p. 7). She acknowledges the necessity of feminist critique of humanism for excluding women from its rhetoric about and politics regarding freedom, autonomy and rationality. This tension should be seen as the result of a gap between men's humanist general principles and non-inclusive practices (p. 7). Feminism, according to Michielsens, naturally took place within a secularizing context of advancing Enlightenment philosophies and an emphasis on progress, rationality and empowerment, and the decreasing importance of religious dogmas (p. 8).

Michielsens's stance contradicts the argument made by historian Joan Scott, who critiques secular humanism as an exclusive project that never meant to include women in its parameters and was never about a history of linear progress towards democracy and equality (2009, p. 4). In a footnote Michielsens introduces van Istendael (2008), a Flemish writer and poet, as a current male supporter of women's emancipation. She opposes feminists and antiracist critics who countered van Istendael's fierce opposition to the current increasing visibility of Islam, notably the Islamic

headscarf (Bracke & Fadil, 2009, Heens, 2008). Michielsens continues by emphasizing the need to stand up on behalf of women and underscore rationality, the absence of dogmas, equality between men and women, separation of church and state, equal opportunities, education and resources. She brings in a well-known interview by journalist Matthew D'Ancona with Salman Rushdie (2008), who famously stated that "We have been wimpish about defending our ideas", to underscore:

"We do not say enough that we not only need freedom of religion but especially 'freedom from religion'. This means a society where thinking is more important than believing, and where law, social policies and interaction between human beings is not dictated by religion" (p. 8).

The article is concluded by asking how to best defend core ideas and values. When it comes to the relationship between women and religion, she calls for the establishment of a humanist platform that emphasizes freedom of women and rejects religion. This platform should provide arguments against religions. A combative humanist feminism is needed, according to Michielsens. When dogmas are more important than rationality, women are most vulnerable. Not just Muslim women, but also western women, she adds. In the new contexts we live in, women need to resist on the level of the personal and the collective. If women do not, Michielsens predicts, they will become victims of both extreme right-winged politics and postmodern relativists (p. 9).

Michielsens's article refers often to 'religion', which seems to be understood as a homogenous entity that is essentially oppressive for women. Humanism and religion are positioned as each other's absolute opposites in terms of freedom and human well-being. The words 'we' and 'our' are much used when it comes to describing values such as self-determination and gender equality. To whom these terms refer is never made explicit, but implicitly they speak to a humanist public (the audience of the journal) that is mainly white and middle class. Islam is not explicitly present, and Muslim women are discussed only at the end of the article. The phrase 'Muslim women' suddenly pops up without notice, which may lead readers to presume that the foregoing talk about 'religion' and its dangers for women in fact dealt with Islam. Why religion's irrationality is so dangerous for women – on the level of legal rights, social position or psychological wellbeing – is never explained. However, this probably does not leave the reader confused. As many white humanist and middle-high aged readers will presumably share a common background with the author – that of a history of active or passive participation in the power struggle of liberals, humanists and socialists vis-à-vis the social-political power of Catholicism (de Witte et al., 2005) – they will associate 'religion' with powerful Catholic institutions. Moreover, readers are presumably aware of the public debates about Islam and gender (in)equality and dominant stereotypes of Muslim women (Coene & Longman, 2006). So, when encountered with the general term 'religion', they will automatically read Catholicism/Islam. In Michielsens' narrative, 'religion' as a homogenous and oppressive entity stifling human individual ambitions and aspirations refers therefore in the first place to Catholicism, but its meaning subtly shifts

to Islam. In a context of transforming formations of the secular, Michielsen's call for a renewed struggle against religion aims at Islam. This surmise is confirmed when one looks at the academics and writers mentioned in the bibliography that have inspired the author while writing her article. A number of them – among others Cliteur (2007), Ephimenco (2005), Fallaci (2006), Ali (2006), Sanctorum (2008) and Verhofstadt (2006) – have been extensively critiqued for essentializing and demonizing Islam, homogenizing Muslim men as terrorists and oppressors and Muslim women as victims, a paternalistic and colonizing attitude towards ethnic minority women in combination with a right-winged political agenda, and a teleological reading of women's emancipation as naturally evolving towards increasing individualism, liberal autonomy and secularity (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Bracke, 2011; Mahmood, 2005; Midden, 2012). Michielsen's article seems to be a perfect example of a West-European tradition of humanism that implies continuing conflict with 'religion' (Dobbelaere, 2008) – that is presumed to be appearing and functioning as Catholicism (Franken & Loobuyck, 2012). It follows that 'religion' is understood as in need of containment and rigorous marginalization (Casanova, 2010) to protect individual rights and well-being.

A more nuanced feminist humanist perspective

A different feminist humanist approach to women's emancipation and religious-cultural diversity can be found in the journal's second article written by Gily Coene (2009), entitled 'Feminism, humanism and multiculturalism' (Feminisme, humanisme en multiculturaliteit). In her article, Coene introduces and engages with the so-called feminism versus multiculturalism debate famously initiated by political scientist Susan Moller Okin (1999). She takes off by stating that the context of today's multicultural society forces feminists as well as humanists to critically confront and transform their own points of view. Coene speaks of the lack of consensus among feminists discussing the headscarf, marriage migration, female genital cutting and hymen repair surgery in relation to gender equality and human rights when it comes to defining what equality and women's rights mean in particular contexts and how they can be pursued. She also points at the recuperation of these issues by politicians and opinion-makers who aim at stigmatizing minority groups, notably Muslims, and demonstrating the superiority of their own culture. In this context of public debates in terms of 'us' and 'them', feminists and humanists need to take a nuanced and critical position being sensitive for the particular situation in which women of ethnic minorities find themselves (p. 13, 17). Coene demonstrates that several humanist thinkers already started to rethink the ideal of the multicultural society, leading to very different outcomes. She underscores humanist voices, who emphasize the value of interfaith tolerance and distinguishing between fundamentalist and humanist tendencies within certain worldviews. As an example, she points at the Dutch humanist Derkx (2004) (p. 13). She criticizes other Dutch humanist voices, such as those of Paul Cliteur (2007) and Ali (2006), who confront and demonize Islam as a homogenous and fundamentalist/backward religion that oppresses women (p. 15–16). According to Coene, both Cliteur and Hirs Ali rely on Enlightenment

philosophies which regard religion (but chiefly Catholicism) as per definition dogmatic and unreasonable. However, she adds, many Enlightenment thinkers, such as Jean-Jaques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, held misogynist views and legitimized existing inequality between men and women by claiming that women are 'different'. At the same time, feminists throughout history used Enlightenment ideals to invigorate their demands for equal rights. They did not reject the Enlightenment as intrinsically patriarchal but criticized its philosophical contradictions. Coene compares this with the strategies of today's religious feminists in general, and Islamic feminists in particular, who do not accept authoritative male patriarchal interpretations, but subject religious texts to a woman-friendly re-interpretation (p. 16). This comparison is an interesting critique to academic as well as public voices that consider feminism within religion, notably Islamic feminism, as a near impossibility but often do not explore the patriarchal origins and histories of humanist frameworks (e.g. Moghissi, 2011; Verhofstadt, 2006; Ali, 2006).

This similarity in strategies of feminists within philosophy and religion, Coene writes, doesn't preclude thorough disagreements between secular and religiously inspired feminists about the meaning of emancipation and how to contribute to women's emancipation in the best possible way. The headscarf debate is a case in point. Coene reads disagreements among feminists about the Islamic headscarf and its regulations not as a conflict between traditional and modern norms and values but as conflicts between different interpretations of liberal, humanist or feminists values, such as autonomy and self-determination (p. 16). She points subtly at the power imbalance that shapes these feminist discussions:

"Often we perceive practices of 'others' from a culturalist and ethnocentric point of view and judge them as harmful for women, but we do this much less when it comes to practices in 'our' culture" (2009, p. 17).

Coene concludes by arguing that the problems of women of ethnic minorities can't be solved by fixed principles and law. Public debates and policies need to take a pragmatic position and use an intersectional perspective that pays attention to the specific situation and needs of ethnic minority women. Coene describes intersectional thinking (Crenshaw, 1991; Wekker & Lutz, 2001) here as paying attention to a multiplicity of identity positionings, discriminations, loyalties and dilemma's when it comes to ethnic minority women's emancipation. Experiences with racism and discrimination in the dominant white society as well as forms of gendered oppression within the own group or community need to be taken into account. She feels that the challenge for humanists and feminists today lies in finding solutions for women's problems that don't contribute to stigmatizing minority groups but at the same time do not deny the existence of real problems (p. 17). Coene follows Sawitri Saharso, who – in an 2002 article about her at times conflicting double positioning within the feminism versus multiculturalism debate – calls for looking for ways of speaking and acting that allow to be simultaneously critical and solidary (p. 17).

The intention of Coene's article seems to be underscoring the emancipatory possibilities of multiculturalism as well as

feminism and a call for looking for pragmatic solutions to situations where the ideals of multiculturalism and feminism conflict. She explicitly speaks to an audience of feminists and humanists, probably in particular to those who identify with both categories. Coene doesn't speak about 'religion' in a general way but points at diversity within religious traditions, which allows her to affirm the acts of reclaiming and reinterpreting holy texts by religious feminists in general and Islamic feminists in particular. The highlighting of Islamic feminism is most probably done with the fierce academic as well as public discussions about the incompatibilities of Islam and feminism/women's emancipation in mind (Bracke, 2007, Moghadam, 2002). Coene's call upon humanists and feminists to take up a self-critical stance in the debates and her reading of feminist disagreements as conflicting interpretations of autonomy and self-determination is partly in line with Mahmood's work (2005) in its critique of Western feminism that views and judges the practices of cultural and religious others from an often invisible but normative liberal-secular worldview and positioning. In comparison to Michielsens' humanist feminist standpoint, Coene's humanism doesn't imply conflict with religion. Her humanist feminist vision can be described as opening up to self-critique in relation to cultural-religious diversity and as calling for solidarity with minority women based on a pragmatic and culturally sensitive struggle for women's emancipation.

Secular feminists rethinking religion and feminism in a multicultural society – Vrouwen Overleg Komitee (VOK)

In this paragraph, I shift the focus of this article to the recent trajectory of a white pluralist women's organization, the Vrouwen Overleg Komitee (the Women's Consultation Committee – VOK), regarding Islam and the feminist activism of Muslim women. I draw on a case study I conducted for my doctoral research, in which I reviewed literature on VOK, looked at VOK's recent activities and interviewed two of its board members, its chairwoman, its spokeswoman and two of its active members. Bringing in this case study, I aim to further illustrate the ongoing debates among secular feminists about religious-cultural diversity, Islam in particular. I argue that feminist debate, reflection and self-critique – which the above discussed article of Gily Coene calls for – does at times lead to innovative practices in the realm of feminism, religion and secularity.

VOK was established in the 1972 within a pillarized society as a feminist autonomous location in which feminists belonging to different political parties, civil society organizations, women's movements or labor unions could exchange as individuals their points of view and collaborate. It followed a leftist pluralist trajectory (van Molle, 2004). Since 1979, the ministry of Equal Opportunities of the Flemish community pays the salary of the VOK secretary. Through additional government funding, VOK is able to pay as well the salary of the official spokeswoman. From its early beginnings, VOK is a movement of well-educated, middle class, white women, who identify explicitly with feminism (S'jegers, 2005; van Ertvelde 2012; van Molle, 2004). It has the aim of bringing nuanced perspectives on women's emancipation and multi-layered critiques on structural inequalities between men and women into the public debates, thereby facilitating a greater

awareness of inequality and providing alternative ideas on the structuring of society as well as on emancipation. It tries to achieve this ambition by critically analyzing and querying equal opportunities policies, organizing the yearly National Women's Day (Nationale Vrouwendag) with debates and activities, contributing opinion texts in the media and organizing activities throughout the year in collaboration with other organizations. VOK intends to include an anti-racist agenda within her feminist one, especially since the early 2000s, due to increased reflections on what it means to be a feminist movement in an increasingly multicultural society. VOK is part of a broader leftist and pluralist movement of civil society organizations and autonomous groups where the organization finds its allies and builds collaborations. In what follows, I discuss the ways in which religious diversity, Islam and Muslim women particularly, are considered in or part of the organizations' official standpoints and activities.

A collective process of rethinking and involvement in the headscarf debates

In recent years, VOK has in terms of thinking about feminism in a multicultural society played a highly critical and innovative role within public debates and within the women's movement. With an attitude that is critical but at the same time affirmative towards the relationship between cultural-religious diversity and feminism and women's emancipation, VOK built new feminist practices, which are controversial in the opinion of a large part of the socialist, humanist and liberal movements and commentators, and of the white women's movement. The year 2005 was an important moment in which VOK published her brochure 'A Feminist Perspective on Multiculturalism' (Een Feministische Kijk op de Multiculturaliteit). In this brochure, VOK critiques dominant discourses about the unequal value of different cultures and religions when it comes to gender equality (2005, p. 2). For example, VOK analyzed the repeated call by the well-known liberal commentator and writer Dirk Verhofstadt (2006) upon Muslim women to start a third wave of feminism as originating from a liberal-individualistic model of emancipation that has no eye for cultural-religious differences and is highly paternalistic. VOK queried the opportunism of neoliberal, conservative male politicians and academics, who used to show very little interest in the problematic of the inequality of men and women (p. 5–6). In the flyer, VOK states that feminism can be carried on and practiced by women and men from all cultures and religions, and that the multiplicity of individual social positionings in terms of ethnicity, social class, religion and sexual orientation necessarily leads to a diversity of feminisms. The many faces of feminism should not be considered in terms of hierarchy or opposition, but need to be seen as enriching the debate and as increasing the possibilities of collaboration (p. 4–5). Throughout the brochure, VOK quotes feminists from various ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds to underline this richness of diversity. It quotes for example Nadia Yassine, head of the women's branch of the Moroccan Islamist movement Justice and Charity, who said: "I base my feminism on Islam, not on Western culture" (2005, p. 6). The vision on feminism embraced by VOK seems to be close to Zillah

Eisenstein's notion of what she calls 'polyversal feminism'. As she puts it:

"If context – historical and of the moment – always matters, then I must locate today's feminisms in ways that respect their many differences and varieties, across times, geographical space and culture; along with race, class, ethnicity and sexual preference. [...] I think feminism is always plural and always has been. [...] A polyversal feminism – multiple and connected – expresses women's potential shared humanity wherever it exists" (2004, p. 181, 183).

The flyer meant a crystallization of internal discussions within VOK that were going on already since some time. Interestingly, it also meant a starting point for a new feminist attitude and practice that includes religious identity, notably Islam, in an anti-racism agenda, and that builds upon collaborations with Muslim feminists. In 2007, the government of the largest city in Flanders, Antwerp, instituted a headscarf ban for its public office employees. VOK took the initiative to protest against the Antwerp headscarf ban and collaborated with feminists of Muslim migratory backgrounds. Few VOK members established in collaboration with few Muslim women the autonomous collective *Boss Over Your Own Head!* (*Baas Over Eigen Hoofd!* – BOEH!) that up until today fights against headscarf bans, which are increasingly instituted in the field of education and labor. BOEH! regards the headscarf as included within notions of human rights and the freedom of religion. According to BOEH!, headscarf bans impinge upon women's right to making an individual choice for a specific cultural-religious identity and practice (2011). As such, it endorses a critical liberal-secular feminist standpoint and enlarges notions such as 'autonomy' and 'freedom of choice' in order to embrace the donning of the headscarf within the liberal framework (Mahmood, 2005, p. 195).

The preparedness of VOK to support, enlarge and protect women's freedom of choice, also on the level of cultural-religious identity and practice – was not always welcomed or understood by the women's movement in Flanders. Critics from both within and outside of the women's movement accused VOK of a naïve or even dangerous form of culture relativism that prefers the preservation of culture and religion above women's rights and the equal dignity of women and men (S'jegers 2005) and that is apologetic about Islam instead of critical regarding its traditions.

In rethinking its standpoints and politics and (re)constructing its attitude towards increasing religious-cultural diversity and relationships with Muslim women, VOK had to deal with its members' attachments to histories of leftist (liberal, socialist and feminist) struggles vis-a-vis Catholic institutions and morality. The brochure refers to this history, but criticizes the renewed secularist struggle against the visibility of religion in the public sphere as such:

"During the last decennia in our country, a non-believing minority struggled for a long time for the acknowledgement of her conviction against the omnipresent and powerful Catholic majority. By doing that, she importantly contributed to a pluralist society and a more neutral

government. [...] However, in the current context, VOK does not want to go along with the renewed zeal against religious symbols. Today, VOK resolutely advocates for equal space for all religious and life-stance convictions. Shaping the state's neutrality by starting from pluralism and freedom of religion can be a powerful signal. That is why VOK prefers an inclusive neutrality for our government: an official may express his/her beliefs or ideological conviction through visible symbols, but his/her behavior should fit within the framework of rules belonging to the public office and the laws of the country." (p. 6)

Here, VOK positions itself as a double exception in the field of thinking and practicing feminism and religion: she strongly critiques antireligious and Islamophobic sentiments and denounces its discriminating effects in the public sphere, especially regarding Muslim women, and locates religion not one-sidedly at the side of structural oppression and inequality but regards it as a possible domain of freedom of choice, individual signification and women's emancipation. VOK doesn't agree with exclusive notions of neutrality and supports a notion of inclusive neutrality, that embraces and values differences between people in the public sphere and doesn't aim at banning expressions of cultural-religious diversity and of Muslim women's religiosity.^{iv} VOK counters white feminist Islamophobia by deconstructing images of Muslim women as helpless victims in need of rescue, and by building connections and collaborations with Muslim feminists. VOK understood that regarding issues of sexism and racism, as Bulbeck (2009) puts it:

"Instead of expressing that power in a 'maternalist' superiority, the role of non-Muslim feminists is to [help] open up a space where Muslim women can speak. Their voices will then challenge the perception of the Muslim community as conservative and homogenous, which prevails when the most influential Muslim spokespersons are conservative males." (p. 216)

Due to this exceptional positioning, VOK became a critical mirror for the white secular women's movement and the broader political and public debates – something not all commentators are comfortable with.

Conclusion

In this article, I aimed to demonstrate the multiplicity and complexity of secular feminisms and their relationship to religion, cultural-religious diversity and Islam in the context of a West-European society. I probed several recent secular feminist responses to Islam and the activism of Muslim women in the context of the Flemish religious-secular landscape and particular formations of Catholic secularity. I focused on recent contributions by two feminist writers to the humanist debate about feminism, religion and increasing cultural-religious diversity, particularly Islam. I also paid attention to the recent trajectory of a white, middle class pluralist women's organization regarding its approach towards cultural-religious diversity, the Islamic headscarf and the feminist activism of Muslim women. In this way, I

demonstrated some of the diversity of the local landscape of feminism, religion and secularity: secular feminists have responded to increasing urban religious diversity and the claims of Muslim feminists in diverging ways. These responses point at the current controversy among white secular feminists about religion and the (im)possibility of women's emancipation within religious frameworks or on the basis of religious argumentations – especially when they are Islamic. They also point at diverging (re)constructions of white feminist secularities in relation to religion.

While secularist protagonists in the public debates (Bracke & Fadil, 2009) have Catholicism and its institutions in mind when speaking about 'religion' in general, they bring their anti-religious sentiments to bear upon claims of Muslim migrant communities, particularly regarding the Islamic headscarf, as unwelcome 'intrusions' of religion in the public sphere and as impossible trajectories for the emancipation of women and minorities. In their deconstruction of dominant discourses about secularity and secularism, Jakobsen and Pellegrini (2008) demonstrated how the notion that secularity (and not religion) allows for freedom and emancipation is part of the broader romantic narrative that couples secularization, autonomy, modernity and peace in a story of linear historical progress. Their edited work gives space to the critical analysis of multiple secularisms worldwide in order to open more space for other possible narratives about secularity, religion and feminism (p. 27–28). My article likewise deals with the secular in the plural – but instead on the local level of white secular feminist voices in Flanders – as it demonstrates divergent forms of feminist secularity when it comes to attitudes towards Islam. Although this exploration wasn't meant to be an exhaustive one, it nevertheless shows that a diversity of feminist secular narratives about and attitudes vis-a-vis Islam exists and that dominant notions can be changed into other narratives and practices.

Scholars such as Gole (2010) and Scott (2007) offer post-secular critique by pointing at the colonizing and sexual powers of the secular. When we look at the Flemish landscape of feminism and religion, we can likewise speak of the sexual and colonizing powers of secularity, but simultaneously of the sexual and interpellative powers of Islam. The public debates in Flanders offer clear examples of a dominant colonizing and sexist drive to increasingly problematize and exclude everything religious from the public sphere, projected upon Muslim minorities. When we look at the different feminist secular narratives regarding Islam discussed in this article, we see how increasing cultural-religious diversity and Islam interpellate white secular feminists. In their narratives, the simultaneous powers of the secular and religious are at work, reconfiguring one another.

Michielsens's feminist humanist vision originates from a secularity that implies conflict with religion (Dobbelaere, 2008). In her narrative, humanism and religion are positioned as each other's absolute opposites in terms of freedom, women's emancipation and human well-being. In general, 'religion' is presumed to be appearing and functioning as Catholicism and understood as in need of containment and rigorous marginalization. A totally different feminist humanist secularity is espoused by Coene. Her intention lies in unearthing the emancipatory possibilities of both multiculturalism and feminism and trying to find pragmatic solutions

to situations where the ideals of multiculturalism and feminism conflict. Hers is a self-critical secularity that reflects on the normativity of liberal-secular values and positionings (Mahmood, 2005) and points at the power dynamics that are part of the debates about feminism, religion and secularity. In comparison to the narrative of Michielsens, Coene's feminist humanism doesn't necessarily imply conflict with religion. She rather calls for solidarity with ethnic minority women based on a pragmatic and culturally sensitive struggle for women's emancipation.

The secularity of VOK was interpellated and has been transformed by reflections on increasing cultural-religious diversity, inequality and the claims of Muslim feminists. VOK took part in reconfiguring the feminism and religion landscape by taking up a feminist anti-headscarf ban stance as part of their anti-racist agenda – a move that surprised many at the time and is still by some commentators regarded as anti-feminist and conservative. The historical power struggle between the humanists, liberals and socialists vis-à-vis the Catholic pillar is one of the fundamentals of the coming into being of the Belgian state and public sphere as it looks like today (de Witte et al., 2005), and largely explains current virulent anti-Catholic and Islamophobic sentiments from the part of humanists, liberals and socialists. VOK members partly had to deal with this history in their reconstruction of their relationship with 'religion'.

However, when one looks at women's organizations in Flanders that historically originated within the Catholic pillar, one will indeed find past and current white women's engagement with issues of religion and spirituality coming forth from a Christian inspiration and mission. Further research is needed to look at recent constructions of religion, secularity and feminism – and the attitudes towards and collaborations with Muslim women that are part of it – in the narratives and experiences of feminists active in women's organizations that work on the basis of a Christian mission.

In the rapidly secularizing society of Flanders, in which anti-Catholic and Islamophobic sentiments are part and parcel of the public debates intersecting with feminist issues, the landscape of feminism and religion will probably stay in full motion the coming years. White secular feminists' future interaction with Islam and Muslim feminists will continue to be shaped by local histories of feminism and religion, developments in public debates, academic research and policies, and by transformations in Muslim feminists' claims and activism. The degree to and the manner in which white secular feminists dialog and collaborate with Muslim feminists will be an important influence on future white secular feminists' attitudes and narratives. Feminism and religion, as issues of debate and important transformative movements and personal attachments in an increasingly diverse and often unequal society, deserve our continuing critical attention.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Until recently, Belgium used to be a pillarized society, meaning that politics, civil society, media and social life were divided and organized in autonomous pillars: the liberal, the socialist and the Catholic pillar. In Flanders, the Catholic pillar is traditionally the largest and politically, social-culturally and financially the most powerful one. Up until today, political disputes and controversies are often articulated along the traditional pillarized political-social divisions. However, due to increasing pluralism, secularization, individualism and consumerism, the pillars are of decreasing importance for current social life, and especially lost meaning for the new generation (de Witte, Craybeckx, & Meynen, 2005). Also Belgian women's movements need to be situated and understood as originating within a pillarized society – having often origins in either the liberal, socialist or Catholic pillar and corresponding humanist or socialist ideologies and Catholic faith, with the exception of few umbrella organizations and pluralist committees (van Molle, 2004), autonomous movements, and new feminists groups such as those of young women, ethnic minority women and/or Muslim women. So, the term 'secular feminism' refers to those feminisms that originated within the liberal or socialist pillars and/or refer in their work to humanist, liberal and socialist thinking to frame their arguments. This article does not deal with feminism that originated within the Catholic pillar.

ⁱⁱ The discussion is limited to white secular feminisms in Flanders due to language obstacles; as a Dutch-speaking researcher originally from the Netherlands, I do not master the French language sufficiently. I was therefore unable to include French-speaking feminisms from the Walloon region of Belgium in my research. Moreover, the formation that I describe as Catholic secularism is also limited to Flanders. This formation will not be entirely the same in Walloon due to the different histories of civil society and social movements in Flanders and Walloon in relation to diverging positions of power of the Catholic pillar, as well as the current variety of Dutch-speaking and French-speaking academic and public debates in Belgium that are more tuned either to developments in the Netherlands or in France (Coene & Longman, 2008).

ⁱⁱⁱ Up until the moment of writing, this issue is freely available online, see: <http://www.demens.nu/export/sites/default/nl/Publicaties/antenne/Vrouwen-en-humanisme.pdf>

^{iv} This notion of inclusive neutrality was originally coined by the Commission Intercultural Dialogue launched in 2005 by the socialist Minister of Social Integration and Equal Opportunities to map the landscape of intercultural exchange, and inspired those groups who argue for permitting the headscarf at public offices (Coene & Longman, 2008, p. 11–12).

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